

## NATIVE-LIKE ACCENT: A MYTH OR A GOAL? A STUDY ON LEARNER PREFERENCES FOR ENGLISH ACCENTS

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**Abstract:** the issue of English as an International Language (EIL) has been a long debate in contemporary English language teaching (Holliday, 2005). As an international language, a wide variety of Englishes is developed in different parts of the world. This concept challenges the widely-accepted view on Native-speakerism and offers learners with alternative models in their English language practices (Lippi-Green, 2003; Golombek & Jordan, 2005). Thus, this study intends to take a closer look at learners' view on English accents that often become a site of struggle for adult learners of English. Open-ended questionnaires were distributed to students of Pronunciation classes in Universitas Sanata Dharma to dig out their perspectives and opinions about their preferred accents. The data suggest that while the participants disclosed their awareness of some varieties of accents, they were still in favour of the *so-called* British and American accents, which are widely considered as native English accents. Their preference was mostly based on their familiarity of both accents. Furthermore, the difficulties they faced in getting those accents suggest that getting a native-like accent is actually problematic yet desirable at the same time.

**Keywords:** *World Englishes, Accent, Learner preference*

### Introduction

In Indonesia, where English is a foreign language, learners of English often struggle with both English sounds, such as consonants and diphthongs, and English suprasegmental features, such as intonation, stress, and accents. While dealing with sounds is indeed problematic for Indonesian learners as some sounds in English do not exist in their mother tongues, e.g. /v/ and /θ/, coping with the suprasegmental features might make English pronunciation more challenging.

Of suprasegmental features, accent –defined as one's way of speaking– may be one of the most complex issues. In the case of Indonesia, English language learners may have developed their accents as they have acquired their mother tongue. Their accents, of course, influence their English language learning. Therefore, speaking a native-like accent seems impractical. Although changing one's way of speaking might seem unrealistic for some people, getting a particular English accent might be a goal for some English language learners.

In regard to the trend in English language learning, the issue of English as an International Language has been a long debate (Holliday, 2005). As an international language, a wide variety of Englishes is developed in different parts of the world. This concept challenges the widely-accepted view on Native-speakerism and offers learners with alternative models in their English language practices (Lippi-Green, 2003; Golombek & Jordan, 2005).

The next question is then: which accent should students learn? This question may get intricate answers especially due to the vast development of World Englishes. This question, however, may be answered if teachers understand which accents are preferred by the students. Thus, this study aims at answering these two questions: 1) what varieties of English accents are preferred by students?, 2) what difficulties do they find in getting their preferred accents?

### Review of Related Literature

Accents in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class, particularly a Pronunciation class, may be a problematic issue raised by English teachers. Dauer (2005) addresses a significant issue within this matter. She states that English consists of many varieties and Standard English taught in schools is basically a written language, not an accent. Thus, "the first question any pronunciation teacher must address is, what accent should I teach?" (Dauer, 2005, p. 543).

While Dauer (2005) underlines the issue of which accent to teach, Golombek and Jordan (2005) assert that today's Pronunciation class should aim for intelligibility instead of native English accents. They maintain that "pronunciation pedagogy has made strides toward creating a more realistic definition of intelligibility-- one that reflects the belief that sounding like a native speaker is neither possible nor desirable" (Golombek & Jordan, 2005, p. 513). Thus, one – particularly an EFL learner - should not aim for having a native-like accent.

Yet, other studies have shown how accents and opportunities have an intricate interplay. In this case, one who does not speak a native-like accent might find it more difficult to get opportunities in a country in which English is the first language, e.g. the United States. Looking at accent-reduction among some immigrants in the United States, Newman (2002) contends that despite correct English grammar, unintelligible accents equal to fewer opportunities. He further states that “the distinction between accent and unintelligibility creates a zone of anxiety for foreigners, not just for poor immigrants but for techies, doctors, and college teachers who want nothing to hinder their chances here. The way they speak English- even grammatically perfect English - can shape the course of their lives”. Newman (2002) also underlines how accent can be a strong identity marker. It can show which race a person belongs to, as well as his national and regional origin, class, and education. Therefore, a stereotype may arise (Lippi-Green, 1997, as cited in Golombek & Jordan, 2005). Newman (2002, p. 62) also contends that an accent is “a conventional tool for quick judgment”. Thus, having an intelligible accent, a person may be considered speaking bad English.

The studies of EFL learners’ perceptions of accents can shed a light on how certain accents are perceived. A study by Scales, Wennerstrom, Richard, and Wu (2006) about English language learners’ perceptions of accents found that more than half of the participants’ goal was to sound like an English native speaker although the participants did not identify some English accents correctly. The study showed that this inconsistency was due to “an idealized conception of what the native accent aspired to actually sounds like” (Scales et al., 2006, p. 715). In short, the study suggests that English language students have some sort of preference for native English accents and have certain idea of how the native accents should sound.

Although accents may not interfere with comprehension, accents tend to be closely related to attitudes. In her study of the effects of Korean elementary school teachers’ accents on their students’ listening comprehension, Butler (2007) finds that the teachers’ accents do not result in the differences in comprehension. Yet, the study also finds significant difference in students’ attitudes towards teachers with American-accented English and Korean-accented English. Students tend to prefer a teacher with an American accent because they think that she has better pronunciation. She also tends to be more confident in speaking English, focuses more on fluency than on accuracy, and speaks less Korean in English language classes. .

In line with the study by Butler (2007), Castro and Roh (2013) find that students might not prefer having teachers with non-native English accents. In their study on the exploration of Korean students’ perceptions of variations from a standard variety of English, Castro and Roh (2013) have suggested that Korean students gave negative responses towards the idea of having teachers with a Philippine accent. However, despite the negative responses, “the number of Koreans coming to study in the Philippines continues to increase each year” (Castro & Roh, 2013).

The discussion around native and non-native accents cannot be separated from the Three Circles model proposed by Kachru (1985 as cited in Park and Wee, 2009). For years, Kachru’s model on Englishes has been referred by English language practitioners. Kachru (1985) as cited in Park and Wee (2009) formed three circles in regard to the use of English across countries. The first circle is the Inner Circle countries consisting of the USA, the UK, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada. These countries are where “the traditional monolingual native speakers of English are located” (Kachru, 1985, as cited in Park and Wee, 2009, p. 389). The next circle, the Outer Circle, consists of countries that were colonized by English-speaking countries, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and India. In the post-colonial era, English maintains its official status in those countries. In addition, English has become the mother tongue of people born in those countries. Yes, varieties of English are spoken as a result of the contact of English with local-languages (Kachru, 1986, as cited in Park & Wee, 2009). The last circle, the Expanding Circle countries, is where English does not retain official status and is used a medium of international communication. A number of countries in the world belong to this circle, such as Indonesia, South Korea, Japan, and China.

However, Kachru’s model has been criticized for some underlying reasons. It does not adequately explain the “the heterogeneity and dynamics of English-using communities: it cannot accommodate hard-to-classify cases such as Egypt and South Africa; it does not allow for the possibility of countries moving from one classificatory circle to another; it is too oriented towards the nation-state; and (ironically) it perpetuates the very inequalities and dichotomies that it otherwise aims to combat, such as the distinction between native and non-native speakers” (Park & Wee, 2009, p. 390). In short, the use of the term ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ speakers might be political and cannot be seen as clear cut definition.

## Research Methodology

To solve the research problems, a survey was conducted. Generally, survey research is done to collect information from participants by examining their responses to certain questions. The participants were 32 students in Pronunciation classes at the English Department and the English Extension Course of Universitas Sanata Dharma, Yogyakarta. In this study, open-ended questionnaires were distributed to the participants to collect the data. Afterwards, the data obtained were decoded. To code open questions involves “reading and

rereading transcripts of respondents' replies and formulating distinct themes in their replies" (Bryman, 2012, p. 248). Therefore, some significant themes that appear from the data are presented in the subsequent section.

## Findings and Discussion

From the questionnaires, it can be seen that there were a number of varieties of English accents that the participants were familiar with. American accent was the most mentioned (33.0%), followed by British accent (27.7%). In the third place was Australian accent (19.1%), followed by Indonesian (5.3%), Singaporean (3.2%) and Indian accents (3.2%). Other accents mentioned were African American, Japanese, Philippine, Javanese, Chinese, Northern American, Southern American, and Middle Eastern. Each of them was mentioned once (1.1%).

Although the participants disclosed their familiarity with the previously mentioned accents, when asked about the accent(s) that the participants preferred, there were limited answers. The most preferable accent to learn was American accent (54.76%), followed by British English accent (42.86%) and Australian (2.38%).

Their preference for the three accents undoubtedly was influenced by some factors. The biggest factor was their being familiar with the accents because they are commonly used in conversations and also in English movies (47.22%). The participants also claimed that their preference for certain accents was because those accents were easy to learn (33.33%) and those accents were the 'original accents' used as a standard (11.11%). Other responses include the opinions that those accents sounded more educated (2.78%) and suited 'the Indonesian's tongue' (2.78%). Although one of the common reasons to prefer for certain accents was because they were easy to learn, one participant uncovered a quite distinctive reason. She said that because her preferred accent (British accent) was difficult for her to get, she wanted to gain that accent.

Regarding the difficulties the participants may face in getting their preferred accents, the participants provided diverse responses. The major cause was the influence of their mother tongue (21.05%). Differentiating sounds (15.79%), limited resource and exposure (15.79%), and wrong pronunciation (15.79%) became the next difficulties. Some other participants stated that to get the accent was challenging rather than difficult (10.53%) and they mismatched American and British accents (10.53%). Other responses include their being afraid to make mistakes (5.26%) and their being new to British accent because they used to learn American accent (5.26%).

On the whole, in line with Scales et al. (2004), the data imply that the participants still opted for native-like accents, such as American, British, and Australian accents. However, the participants also realized that their mother tongue has somehow hindered them in getting their preferred accents. The difficulties they faced in getting those accents further suggest that getting a native-like accent is actually problematic yet desirable at the same time. Another implication from the data is that the participants may not be fully aware of the complexity of the dichotomy of native and non-native speakers. The words 'standard' and 'original' attached to their preferred accents revealed that they had not had a profound understanding of the EIL paradigm although they were aware that a wide variety of Englishes has been arising. In addition, the response from the participant stating that certain accents sounded more educated also reflects how people are sometimes judged from the accents they have (Newman, 2002).

## Concluding Remarks

To sum up, this small scale study has shown that getting a native-like accent is still a goal for some EFL learners despite the growth of World Englishes. The data also suggest that the *so-called* native English accents are the most widely used models when they are learning English. Thus, it increases their familiarity with those accents and, as a result, those accents become the models in speaking English. It seems that the participants have not got enough exposure to other varieties of English than the ones coming from the Inner Circle countries. Thus, based on the findings of this study, further research may discuss how EFL learners can get wider exposure on different varieties of English, particularly in a Pronunciation or Speaking class. The findings of this study can also be a stepping stone to embark on a study in the field of EIL, e.g. to what extent the awareness of EIL paradigm affects learner preferences for certain English accents.

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